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AUTHOR Moore, Kristin A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The assertion that parental communication and monitoring of adolescent children will discourage premarital activity was examined in a two-stage study. First, the influence of a set of variables measuring parental supervision and discussion was analyzed using data for all 15- and 16-year olds interviewed in the 1981 National Survey of Children. Next, the effect of the same set of variables was examined among sub-samples of families in which the parents hold either traditional or liberal attitudes on family issues. These analyses suggest that parental communication with teenage children does not often discourage sexual activity. In general, the discussion of sex is apparently much more common with daughters than sons, and has the impact of postponing sexual activity primarily among the daughters of traditional parents. These results suggest the future researchers should obtain data not only on whether parents and teens discuss sex, but also on the topics they cover, the direction of any advice given, and the underlying attitudes toward sex and family life held by parents. It may well be, for example, that traditional parental attitudes have different effects on contraceptive use than on sexual activity. Finally, these results suggest that the impact of parental communication varies not only according to the attitudes held by parents but by the sex of the teenager. (KH)

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Family Attitudes and the Occurrence of Early Sexual Activity

A Research Note

by

Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D.
James L. Peterson, Ph.D.
Child Trends, Inc.
1990 M Street NW
Washinton, D.C. 20036

and

Frank F. Furstenberg, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania

August, 1985

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Family Attitudes and the Occurence of Early Sexual Activity
A Research Note

Abstract

The assertion that parental communication and monitoring of adolescent children will discourage premarital sexual activity is examined among white 15 and 16-year olds interviewed in the 1981 National Survey of Children. Analyses indicate little support for this hypothesis in the total sample. When the sample is partitioned according to whether the parents hold traditional attitudes, one group -- the daughters of traditional parents who have communicated with them about sex or about television -- are found less likely to have had intercourse.

Key words: Premarital intercourse, Sexual activity, Parent-child communication, Communication

FAMILY ATTITUDES AND THE OCCURRENCE OF EARLY SEXUAL ACTIVITY

A Research Note

INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers have explored the hypothesis that parental monitoring and communication reduce the likelihood that teens will initiate premarital sexual activity (Fox and Inazu, 1980: Ross, 1979; Hogan and Kitagawa, 1983; Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg, 1985). Although Newcomer and Udry (1985; 1984) find no effect of communication, frequently these analysts have found that greater communication does dampen the probability of early sex. For example, Fox and Inazu (1980) report that daughters who talk more with their mothers have attitudes and behavior patterns that lower their pregnancy risk, while Abrahamse, Morrison and Waite (1985) find that teens who talk with their parents often are less likely to become unwed mothers. It is generally assumed in these analyses that parents are fairly uniform in their opposition to premarital sexual activity. However, the content of parent/child conversations is not explicitly known, at least no explicit operationalization is made to capture differences in such attitudes. Even when factual topics are discussed, misinformation is often transmitted (Furstenberg, 1976). When issues of morality, life style, and social acceptability are discussed, the potential for variation in what is transmitted is enormous. Moreover, significant changes have occurred in the attitudes of adults over the past several decades (Thornton, 1982), and it cannot necessarily be assumed that all parents feel strongly about the importance of postponing sexual activity until marriage.

The purpose of the current analyses is to explore whether parent-child discussion and parental supervision differ in their effects on sexual activity as a function of the parent's own attitudes. The influence of a set of variables measuring parental supervision and discussion is first explored among a sample of all 15 and 16-year-olds interviewed in the 1981 National Survey of Children. Subsequently, the effect of the same set of variables is examined among sub-samples of families in which the parents hold either traditional or liberal attitudes on family issues.

DATA

These analyses are based on data for 15 and 16-year olds interviewed in the National Survey of the children. This survey is the second wave of a nationally representative longitudinal survey of U.S. children designed to assess the physical, social and psychological well-being of different groups of American children. The second wave of the survey followed up a subsample of the children originally interviewed in 1976. Conducted in the spring of 1981, this survey focused more specifically on marital disruption and its effects on children. Consequently the subsample was chosen to include all children in disrupted and high-conflict families as of the time of the first wave, and a subsample of those in low or moderate conflict families. Weights were developed to take account of this subsample and sample attrition. Most of the background and outcome measures were repeated in the 1981 survey. In addition, new data were obtained on outcome areas more relevant for teenage children, including sexual activity.

All respondents aged 15 and 16, males and females, were asked about the sexual experience of their friends and about their own sexual and pregnancy experience. One hundred and twenty of the 461 respondents in this age range reported having had sexual intercourse. These analyses include only white respondents, as related analyses have indicated that different factors predict sexual activity among adolescent blacks than among whites. Separate analyses were conducted for males and females. Further information about sample characteristics and interviewing procedures is available (see Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg, 1985 or Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore and Peterson, 1985).

During the interview, the young person and a parent were both interviewed. Among the questions addressed to the parent is a series of questions on marriage and family life. These tap attitudes regarding divorce, the appropriate division of labor in a family, maternal employment, and marriage. A subset of three items measuring traditional attitudes was selected on the basis of high and statistically significant item inter-correlations to divide the sample approximately in half -- those youth with parents holding traditional attitudes and those holding less traditional attitudes.1

RESULTS

To explore the extent to which parental discussion and monitoring influence adolescent sexual activity, five measures were included in a multiple classification analysis:

-- the parent's report of the proportion of their child's friends that they know as a measure of supervision;

-- the young person's assessment of whether his or her parents discuss decisions and listen to him or her, as a measure of communication in general;

-- the adolescent's report of whether he or she discusses television with parents, as a measure of discussions likely to involve life style and moral issues;

-- the adolescent's report of whether he or she has discussed sex with a parent, as a more concrete measure of communication on the behavior in question;

-- and the parent's assessment of how good a place their neighborhood is for a child to grow up, as a measure of the parent's perception of the challenge parent's view of whether the neighborhood in which they reside is a supporting place, given the parent's childrearing goals, or a challenging environment. It is also, of course, in part a control for the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood.

Total Sample

The parent's traditionality was not taken into account in this first set of analyses. As shown in Table 1, nearly all of the variables bear modest and generally non-significant associations with sexual activity among these adolescents. Children whose parents know

-- Insert Table 1 About Here

all or most of their friends are less likely to be sexually experienced among males as well as females, although the association

reaches statistical significance only among females. Sons whose parents tend to listen and discuss decisions with them are somewhat less likely to be sexually experienced, although no effect is not found for daughters.

Teens who discuss television with their parents are less likely to have had sex; however, the effect does not reach significance for males or females. Also, those daughters who report their parents have discussed sex with them are somewhat less likely to have had sex; however, the opposite effect is found among sons, and it is statistically significant, a reversal that is not explained with certainty. Finally, a modest impact is found for neighborhood quality. Those youth living in neighborhoods that their parents define as excellent or very good places for children to grow up are somewhat less likely to initiate sex at an early age.

The variation explained for these models is quite limited -- 3 percent for females and 5 percent for males. Among males the model is statistically significant, due primarily to the one significant if somewhat unexpected finding. Certainly one would not conclude on the basis of these results that parental communication would have a really substantial effect on the incidence of early sexual activity.

Traditional/Less Traditional Sub-Groups

In the next set of analyses, shown in Table 2, the male and female samples were each divided into youth whose parents are more traditional in their family attitudes and those who are less traditional.

-- Insert Table 2 About Here

Parental traditionality per se is clearly associated with a lower incidence of sexual activity among daughters. Those adolescent females whose parents express traditional attitudes about marriage and family life are only half as likely to report having had sex as those young women with less conservative parents (9 versus 20 percent). Among white males, however, parental attitudes are not correlated with the incidence of sexual experience reported. How do the several measures of communication and monitoring relate to early sex within the sub-groups defined by parental attitudes?

Considering females first, it is immediately apparent that the two measures of communication are strongly related to a lower probability of early sexual activity among daughters of traditional parents (both $p < .01$), while none of these variables are related with sexual activity in the moderate-liberal group. Among the young women whose parents express traditional attitudes, only 1 percent of those who report that they frequently talk with parents about the programs they watch are sexually experienced, compared with 24 percent of those whose do not discuss television. Among daughters with more liberal parents, discussing TV programs has no impact on the probability of early sex. Though we have no data on the substance of these discussions, we presume that parents transmit their values, since the low cell is the cell in which traditional parents talk a great deal to their parents.

Similarly, among daughters of traditional parents, only 3 percent of those who discuss sex with either parent are sexually

experienced, compared with 20 percent of the daughters who do not discuss sex with either parent. Discussion of sex has essentially no impact among daughters whose parent professes more liberal attitudes. Again the single low cell is that in which a parent holds traditional attitudes and the daughter reports parental discussion.2

Whether the daughter reports that her parents listen to her and discuss decisions bears no relation to whether she is sexually experienced, when variables measuring discussion of TV and sex are included in the model. However, unadjusted for these variables (not shown), there is an association among the daughters of traditional parents: 3 percent of those whose parents listen and discuss decisions have had sex compared to 12 percent of those whose parents who communicate less. There is no difference, adjusted or unadjusted, related to whether parents discuss and listen among the daughters of more liberal parents.

The other variables, which are less specifically focused on communication regarding attitudes, show little interaction with parental attitudes. Whether the parent knows the daughter's friends has a modest impact regardless of the parent's family attitudes, as does living in a neighborhood considered excellent or very good for children. (In both cases, there is a main effect for traditionality, but no interaction effect for monitoring or environment.)

As previously noted, there is no overall impact of parental traditionality among sons. This may occur because the parent interview was in most instances completed by the mother rather than the father, and the mother's attitudes may be less relevant for sons than for daughters. However, another explanation may be that parents

do not express their attitudes as readily or as explicitly to sons as to daughters. Only 17 percent of the sons reported discussing sex with either parent, compared with 67 percent of the daughters. In addition, parental communication appears to have little impact on sons, regardless of parental attitudes. In fact, among more traditional parents, discussing sex with a son is associated with a higher incidence of premarital sexual activity, suggesting the possibility that these discussions may occur in reaction to sexual activity rather than a form of "innoculation" ahead of time.

Overall, among sons with more liberal parents, none of the parent-child variables has any impact. The only significant association is that male teens living in an excellent or very good neighborhood are less likely to be sexually experienced. This association may reflect the lower levels of sexual activity among college-oriented white males from relatively well-educated families (Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg, 1985), or it may reflect the impact of the peer group in less desireable neighborhoods relative to more desireable neighborhoods. It does not reflect income, since income level does not predict sexual activity among sons of more liberal parents.

On the other hand, one of the other variables does provide some evidence that discussion may lead to less sexual activity among sons in traditional families. Sons who report that their parents often listen and discuss decisions with them are less sexually active, providing the parents hold traditional attitudes. (As noted, the same association was found among daughters of traditional parents prior to controlling for the measures of discussing television and

discussing sex with parents; no assocation was found among daughters of liberal parents either before of after controlling for the other measures.) This association between general communication and less sexual activity among the sons of traditional parents may suggest instances in which communication tends to precede the initiation of sex. Unfortunately, we cannot test the issue of causal ordering with these data.

What the overall results clearly do not suggest is that parents discuss sexual activity with sons prior to their becoming sexually active with the result that sons postpone sexual involvement. It seems more probable that few parents initiate discussions about sex with sons regardless of parental family attitudes, but that evidence of sexual activity leads to discussion of sex among traditional parents.

DISCUSSION

Parental communication with teenage children is often recommended as a means to discourage early sexual activity. On the basis of these analyses one would have to modify this recommendation, however, since it is clear that among the 15 and 16-year-olds in this sample parental discussion is associated with less frequent initiation of sexual activity only for daughters whose parents who hold more traditional attitudes regarding families.

While this result makes considerable intuitive sense, few researchers have explored the content of parental communication at length. These results suggest that future researchers obtain data not only on whether parents and teens discuss sex, but also on the topics they cover, the direction of any advice given, and the

underlying attitudes toward sex and family life held by parents.3 Information on the timing of the discussions and the timing of initial and subsequent intercourse are also needed in order to establish the causal order of events. In these analyses, we have divided the sample on the basis of several very general questions regarding marriage and family asked of one parent. With a broader range of data on the substance, timing and specificity of the parent-child discussions, it should be feasible to pinpoint exactly what aspects of communication are most important.

Also, we have looked at only one behavior affecting the incidence of adolescent pregnancy. It may well be that traditional parental attitudes have different effects on contraceptive use, for example, than on sexual activity. Thus, other outcomes also need to be examined.

Finally, these results suggest that the impact of parental communication varies not only according to the attitudes held by parents but by the sex of the teenager. Among daughters of traditional parents, the incidence of sexual activity is lower when the parents discuss sex and also when the parents discuss television programming with their daughter. Moreover, prior to controlling for these latter two variables, the extent to which parents generally listen and discuss decisions with their daughters also predicts to a lower incidence of sexual activity among daughters with traditional parents. Among sons, this general tendency on the part of traditional parents to listen to their son and discuss decisions is related to a lower probability of sexual activity; however the discussion of sex per se is associated with a greater likelihood that

the son is sexually experienced. Since two in three daughters discuss sex with at least one of her parents, compared to only one in six sons, it seems likely that sex doesn't come up for discussion with sons unless the parents perceive that it has become an issue -- a definition that seems more common among traditional than among liberal parents. In general, though, the discussion of sex is much more common among daughters than sons and has the impact of postponing sexual activity primarily among the daughters of traditional parents.

Footnotes

1 These items are "Marriages are better when the husband works and the wife runs the home and cares for the children;" "Children are better off if their mothers do not work outside the home;" and "When parents divorce, children develop permanent emotional problems." Respondents answered that they "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" or they could respond that "it depends" which was coded as the middle category. Scores on the five point scale were summed for the three items, and the sample was divided roughly in half on the basis of the parental attitudes. Since parental attitudes are skewed in the direction of being traditional, the traditional group is quite homogeneous in its attitudes, while the non-traditional group includes parents with both liberal and intermediate attitudes.

2 Results from a school-based sample of white adolescents studied by Newcomer and Udry (1984; 1985) indicate that parental communication has modest effects and is overwhelmed by the effect of the mother's own behavior when she was a teen. We find the mother's own age at first birth to be moderately associated with the probability that their daughter has initiated sex; but the association between communication and less sexual activity among daughters of traditional parents continues to hold when the mother's own age at first birth is controlled.

3 Another measure was also used to divide the sample: "Living together before marriage makes a lot of sense." However, this variable did not discriminate as effectively as the more general traditionality scale. Newcomer and Udry (1985) also report a lack of effect for a very similar variable (whether the mother thinks it permissable for unmarried people to have sex). Hence we would suggest that future research should concentrate on measuring both items specific to adolescent sexuality and items that tap family values more generally.

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Table 1

Percent Sexually Experienced, by Sex,

Among 15- and 16-Year-Old White Adolescents,

1981 National Survey of Children

	White Females	White Males
	Total	Total
Parent knows child's friends:		
All or most	.12 (135)	.19 (118)
Half or fewer	.28 (36)	.27 (54)
Parents listen & discuss decisions		
Often	.15 (49)	.12 (34)
Less than often	.15 (122)	.24 (138)

Table 1

Percent Sexually Experienced, by Sex,

Among 15- and 16-Year-Old White Adolescents,

1981 National Survey of Children

(continued)

	White Females	White Males
	Total	Total
Discuss TV w/parents:		
Hardly ever, never	.21 (64)	.23 (95)
Often, sometimes	.11 (107)	.19 (77)
Discuss sex w/you:		
At least 1 parent	.13 (110)	.38 (29)
Other or no one	.18 (61)	.18 (143)
Neighborhood:		
Excellent, very good	.13 (120)	.18 (20)
Good, fair, poor	.18 (51)	.30 (52)
Mean	.15 (171)	.21 (172)
R2	.06	.08
Adjusted R2	.03	.05*

$p < 0.01$, two-tailed test

$p < 0.05$, two-tailed test

Table 2

Percent Sexually Experienced Among 15- and 16-Year Old White Adolescents, by Sex and Family Attitudes of Their Parent, 1981 National Survey of Children

	White Females		White Males	
	Traditional	Moderate-Liberal	Traditional	Moderate-Liberal
Parent knows child's friends:				
All or most	.09 (66)	.16 (68)	.19 (60)	.18 (58)
Half or fewer	.13 (14)	.32 (22)	.31 (26)	.25 (28)
Parents listen & discuss decisions				
Often	.11 (22)	.21 (26)	.02 (14)*	.23 (20)
Less than often	.08 (58)	.20 (54)	.27 (72)	.19 (66)
Discuss TV w/parents:				
Hardly ever, never	.24 (28)**	.20 (36)	.21 (49)	.25 (46)
Often, sometimes	.01 (52)	.20 (54)	.25 (37)	.14 (40)